

Draft letter from Alexander Graham Bell, undated

Action and Gesture in the Instruction of the Deaf.

Alexander Graham Bell

March 26th. 1894

To the Editor s of the Educator:—

It gives me much pleasure to respond to your invitation to address your readers upon the subject of “Signs”. You say;—

“Just what you think of signs and their utility, or lack of utility, is not generally known. I do not know that you have ever given anything that would be considered an authoritative statement of your position.” Solid

It is with some diffidence, I must confess, that, I comply with your request, for the discussion of this subject in the past, as you have very aptly remarked in your editorial upon “The Sign-language Defined”,

“has been for the most part profitless and unproductive of results from the fact that terms have been used indiscriminately and without an agreed-upon and clearly understood meaning.” (Educator Dec. 1893 p.230.)

The nature of my difficulty will be best understood from an example. Allow me to ask the reader a question:—

DO YOU USE SIGNS IN YOUR SCHOOL?

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Now suppose you say “Yes ,” what would we understand you to mean? Surely that the De l'Epee Sign-language is employed in your school. But suppose you say “No,” would this meaning of the word be retained? I am afraid not; and the result would simply be that your veracity would be open to question: For observation of your school work would undoubtedly show that you use d natural action s to illustrate and explain the meaning of English expressions , and expressive gestures to emphasize your words, and give life, and force, and point to what you say.

It is true that these are not De l'Epee signs — (by which I mean the conventional gestures employed in the De l'Epee language of signs) — but are they not natural signs? Even though you should claim that many 2 2 natural actions are not “ signs ” at all, in any sense of the word , and that expressive gestures are not signs when used as accompaniments , merely , of English words , you cannot can you deny that natural gestures are natural signs, properly so called, when used alone, without words alone, at all, to express thought — in the way they are employed oc casionally by hearing people ? We some times, for example, command silence, without speaking ourselves, by placing a finger on the lips. We sometimes rebuke by a gesture or a look alone; or express approval by a nod, as a pat on the head, or a smile and a bow , without words at all. We sometimes beckon a boy to come, or motion him away, without speaking. Every teacher admits that he uses natural signs of this sort — at least occasionally — as hearing people do. But can you deny that natural signs are “ Signs ” ? If not, how can you truthfully say that you do not use signs in your school?

Of course it all depends upon what you mean by “Signs”. If you mean the De l'Epee Language, then they we not signs in that sense , any more than the Signs of the Zodiac are “ Signs ” , for they do not Institute the De l'Epee Language signs. Instead they are called “Natural” signs for the very purpose of distinguishing them from the conventional signs characteristic of the De l'Epee Language.

The question proposed seems a very simple one to a sign teacher for he can say “Yes” at once, and nobody doubts the truth of his assertion; but to those who do not employ the De l'Epee language of signs it is a veritable “catch question”, comparable to the old problem of catch-penny toss-penny — “Heads I win, tails you lose” — the result is against you every time! If you say “Yes”, you are apt to convey a meaning that you know to be untrue; and if you say “No”, your veracity is equally open to question.

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finger spelling in your school, are not the movements of the fingers in forming the manual alphabet, “Signs” for the letters of the alphabet? If you are an Oralist, are not the movements of the lips, “Signs” to the Deaf? (I have known the veracity of honest teachers to be impugned on just such grounds as these). You cannot frown, or smile, or laugh, or stamp your foot, but these are “Signs”. In fact you cannot do anything that is NOT a sign :! For you cannot do anything without moving; and are not actions and motions and gestures of all sorts “Signs”?

But an unfriendly critic need not confine himself to motions or gestures. He can prove, if he chooses, that every picture you show to a child is a “Sign”: Nay more — the very words you employ — whether spoken, or written, or spelled upon the fingers — are “Signs” of ideas. In fact any thing whatever may be a “Sign”! “This shall be a sign unto you. Ye shall find the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke II, 12.)

ACTION S , GESTURE S , AND SIGNS.

Now you ask me what I think of “Signs”; their utility, inutility, &c. Well I must say that with my knowledge of the possible latitude of in the meaning of the word, and with the experience of past discussions of this subject before me, I think we cannot profitably discuss the subject of “Signs” at all, until some agreement has been reached by the profession as to the technical meaning to be assigned to the term. I shall therefore, with your leave, speak of “Action” and “Gesture” instead; because these words have a

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technical, and well understood meaning in Oratory (to which oral work properly belongs); whereas the technical meaning of “Signs” has never been authoritatively defined.

It may be well here to remark, that ordinary hearing people do not consider “gestures” and “Signs” as synonymous terms. Although in our technical use of the word, it is undoubtedly true that all signs are gestures, it does not necessarily follow that all gestures are signs. All potatoes are vegetables, but all vegetables are not potatoes. All gestures are actions, but all actions are

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A number of years ago I had a little congenitally deaf pupil, only five years of age, to whom I taught the English language, through writing and the a manual alphabet. I preferred writing where ever possible; and we carried a writing pad with us when we went for a walk, so that I could write to him about the various things we saw. Indeed I preferred this method of instruction, to the more formal processes of the school room. I remember that upon one occasion, while walking along a country road, we were followed by a strange dog. I saw, by the wagging of his tail, that there was no harm in him; but my little pupil was inclined to be suspicious of his actions and clung to me in terror. The dog sat quietly near us in the middle of the road, while I wrote something about him on upon my pad. With my finger on my lips, and in the most mysterious manner possible, I showed the paper to George — so that the dog should not see it. I conveyed the idea, by my actions, that this was a great secret — intended for George's eye alone — which the dog must not know. In a moment the little fellow forgot his fears. Curiosity got the better of him. He was interested; and, with a knowing wag of his head towards the dog, and with a happy laugh, he looked at the paper. Upon it was written the sentence “George, look at the dog running”. I then picked up a stone and threw it at the dog — and he was off like a shot!

This natural action — of the dog's — interpreted the meaning of the sentence I had written. But was the dog running away, a “Sign”, or even a “Gesture”? My natural action in picking up the stone, and throwing it, may have been a “Gesture”, but was it a “Sign”? The natural

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actions by means of which I conveyed to the boy's mind, without words, the idea that what I was going to show him was a secret, were undoubtedly natural "Signs" , as well as "Gestures".

They were not signs in the sense of De l'Epee language; — but they were signs in the broader sense of gestures of some sort employed in place of words to express ideas. This is one of the meanings attached to the term by ordinary hearing people who know nothing about the deaf.

"And they made signs to his father how he would have him called" (Luke I ., 62.)

This implies that they did not speak. They used gestures instead of words.

"Action" and "Gesture" form special branches of Oratory; but the word "Signs" is not understood in this sense alone, by orators, actors, or teachers of Elocution.

Orators do not understand that they use "Signs" when they gesticulate, in impassioned delivery before a public audience; actors do not know the word in the sense of "Action" on the stage; and teachers of Elocution , though "Gesture" forms a special branch of their professional work, do not know the word "Signs" as an equivalent.

I say this from personal knowledge; for long before? became an instructor of the deaf, I was myself a teacher of Elocution, as my father was before me, and my grand father before him. I have taught the principles of "Expressive Gesture" as a part of my professional work, to elocutionary pupils both hearing and deaf. In teaching a deaf boy to recite a dramatic poem, for instance, I would of course teach him also to use natural and appropriate gestures, just as I would with a hearing boy under similar circumstances. If you study Elocution — or "Speaking well" as the word implies — you must study "Action" and "Gesture" as a necessary part of your course. An awkward position of the body, ungraceful movements of the limbs, inappropriate actions , &c, etc., detract seriously from the effect

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of the best articulation. On the other hand, a good presence, graceful movements, and appropriate actions, improve the effect of poor articulation.

In the very broadest sense in which hearing persons employ the term, the word "Signs" has the meaning of "Symbol," or "Token , " not "Gesture".

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"Then certain of the Scribes and of the Pharisees answered saying, Master, we would see a Sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Mat t hew XII. , 38,39,40).
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Other examples will readily occur to the reader — such as "Signs of the times", "Signs of poverty , " &c etc . "The evening red, and the morning gray, is a sure sign of a very fine day". It is in this sense that words, (whether spoken, written, or spelled upon the fingers) are signs of ideas; and and thus the movements of the fingers in forming the manual alphabet are signs for the letters of the alphabet; and that frowning, smiling, laugh t ing, and stamping your foot are signs. (Signs of emotion for example).

In this sense also an endless variety of actions and gestures will be may be signs even though they simply accompany words instead of taking their p lace. For instance they may constitute Signs of pleasure, affection, love, approval, dislike, anger, hatred, &c. But it will be observed that in ordinary parlance actions or gestures are not signs at all, in any sense of the term (any more than they are "Symbols" or "Tokens") unless they mean something more than the mere motions themselves.

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In this sense, actions and gestures also may be signs even when accompanied by words. Weeping, laughing, smiling, frowning, for instance are "sings of the emotions" whether you

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speak at the same time or not; and a nod is a sign of approval. But, in ordinary parlance, actions and gestures are not signs at all, in any sense of the word, any more than they are “symbols” or “Tokens”, unless they mean something more than the mere motion alone. They must be significant gestures — gestures that mean something — gestures that are employed for the expression of emotion or thought — in order to be signs at all in my opinion. In my last letter to the Committee on Classification of Methods of Instructing the Deaf, I offered this as a definition of “Signs”; but it was not accepted by the Committee, or discussed at all; and the Chairman thought that definitions of technical terms did not properly come within the province of the Committee. The object of the Conference of Superintendents and Principals in appointing the Committee was defeated largely through the inability of the Committee to agree upon the meaning of “Sign-language” and “Signs”. This shows the necessity for some authoritative definition ; of the word, and I hope that the Quadrennial Convention of Instructors will take the matter in hand, and settle it once for all.

UTILITY OF ACTION, AND GESTURE.

I think that natural actions and gestures are of great utility in the instruction of the Deaf, when used as hearing people employ them, as accompaniments of English words, to emphasize and reinforce their meaning. They are useful to illustrate English expressions, just as pictures illustrate the text of a book. They give life and force to the utterances of thought. Books intended for very little children must be copiously illustrated or they will fail to interest at all. Language unaccompanied by natural actions and expressive gestures, is like a book without pictures, a dry and cold thing to present to little children whether hearing or deaf.

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There are no teachers in existence who do not use them, and use them freely. For example &— I have seen one of the gentle women of our Oral Schools teach a deaf baby the meaning of “come”. She said the word, she opened wide her arms , and with a winning

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smile enticed the child to come; and when he came she clasped him lovingly in her arms and rewarded him with a kiss. Now I fancy some captious critic may exclaim that these were "Signs". Perhaps they were — to the child. I do not know. But if such actions as these are what you mean by "Signs", they were natural signs — the kind of signs which every loving mother uses with her child. But did not the child get the meaning of the word from the sign ? He did, and I am glad of it. We all obtained our first knowledge of words in this way. I say, God bless the gentle teachers who can use such signs as these, whether they do, or do not, employ the De l'Epee language of signs.

Then again all teachers permit little children to play; and what we call "play" consists largely of imitative actions, which, if employed without words, would be called pantomime — the acting out of imaginary incidents in a realistic way. It is action, action, action all the time. Many teachers utilize play in the instruction of the deaf for the purpose of teaching the meaning of English expressions to very young children. I think it an admirable plan. In my own practise I have used play freely for this purpose.*

One of the fundamental principles of Froebll's Kindergarten is the systematic utilization of natural actions and gestures, in play, for the instruction of hearing children. We need a system of Kindergarten for the deaf, specially adapted for the teaching of language; and I view the introduction of Kindergarten methods into so many schools for the deaf with great hope. Progress undoubtedly lies in that direction.

The best way to arrive at such a system, I think, is to examine very carefully the process by which hearing children come to understand their vernacular, and study the part played by natural actions and gestures in that process. We certainly do not begin by performing natural actions before a hearing baby, and then require him to express what we have done in English words. The child understands the language to a very considerable extent before his first independent attempts at composition are made. Comprehension comes first, composition afterwards.

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The natural process of learning a language is by imitation. What does this mean? Consider what we do. We talk to the hearing baby in English words — we do not expect him to talk to us. The language we want him to learn — we use ourselves — constantly — in his presence. But does he at first understand what we say? No he does not. How then does he come to understand? The first glimmering conceptions are aroused by concurrent actions — which he observes :— Natural actions interpret the meaning. “John, go and shut the door”, and baby sees John get up and shut the door. You talk to the baby about what is going on. He sees what is going on, and this interprets the meaning. Expressive Expression Gestures, too, are freely used to give life and force and expressive emphasis and life to what you say. Little by little, as the power of comprehension increases, context comes into play. Words known, interpret those that are obscure, by context; and many new words and forms of expression in this way reveal their meaning to the child quite independently of actions at all. And all this process goes on, in the case of the hearing child, before he utters his first word.

Phrases and idiomatic expressions are comprehended as wholes, even wholes, even though the component words may not be fully understood; just as we understood and what Mr. Jenkins meant by “the nux of the whole question”. But how many of us know what “nux” means?

Just think what a multitude of words and phrases are presented to the of the hearing child during the first two years of his life, before he is expected to speak at all; and then consider how much English our pupils see before they are required to express their thoughts by writing or speech. Here is the true “ nux of the whole question”, to borrow Mr. Jenkins' expression:— 10. More English, less signs, and don't use signs in place of words. Use natural actions, and natural gestures, just as you would use them with hearing children — neither less, nor more, nor in a different manner — and you should get the same results.

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If we follow the natural process we should begin by talking to the child in English words (spoken, written, or spelled upon the fingers, according to the method we prefer to employ); and we should be careful to use complete sentences — idiomatic phrases and all — just such language in fact as we would have employed if the child could hear. Natural actions and gestures should, I think, be used with great freedom at the outset of education, in conjunction with words; but not independently of words any more than in the case of the hearing child. After the deaf child has begun to recognize sentences, and comprehend their general meaning (even though he may not fully understand the component words), actions and gestures should be used more sparingly so as to force him to apply context to the interpretation of the language employed. They should be used less and less as his education advances! so as to force him to use context more and more, and thus lead him gradually to the comprehension of English unaccompanied by action at all. “This is a consummation devoutly to be desired? wished”.

It should be our constant endeavour, I think, to use words without action, and avoid action without words. Indeed, as a general rule, I think it would advance the deaf child more in his knowledge of language, to explain unknown words and phrases by other words, than to illustrate the meaning by actions, pictures, or even by objects themselves. Express the same thought in other terms. Incorporate the unknown terms in a new sentence. In a word:— prefer context to every other method of explanation.

I believe the true principle is — to treat the child as though he could hear. Consider what you would do if he was your own hearing boy. For example:— “Papa, what does politeness mean?” Would you not at once attempt to explain its meaning by other English words, and try to enable him to get it by context? “Why you know, my dear, if you do thus and so — you would be very rude; but if you do so you would be very polite”. You would probably give him a number of such examples; but, unless he was a very little fellow indeed, you would never dream of accompanying your words by illustrative actions. If he was a mere baby you would of course use natural actions at once. For example you might

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show him how to hand a book to Mamma “very politely” &c. — but with an older child you would use words alone.

The only natural defect in the deaf child is his inability to hear : I think therefore that we should treat him exactly as we do treat the hearing child, excepting in matters affecting the ear. The English language is addressed to the ear of the ordinary child. I n the case of the deaf it must be addressed to the eye (or some other sense that than that of hearing). This is all that the necessities of his case require. There need be no difference in the matter of “Signs”; and I think there should not; for it is certainly one of our objects, as instructors, to make the deaf child as like the hearing child as the necessities of his case admit.

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SIGN-LANGUAGE.

In the Christmas Pantomime we have an illustration of natural actions and natural gestures employed by themselves in place of words to express ideas. This then is an exhibition of natural sign-language.

W e all enjoy P antomimic acting where ever wherever we see it; and it is therefore surely a strange and significant fact that Pantomime should only be presented to the public as a comic show. I would not use natural actions and natural gestures in this way in the instruction of the deaf. I don't want a deaf child to form the habit of expressing his thoughts by pantomime if it can possibly be helped. I wouldn't like my hearing child to do it; and you wouldn't like yours. Why not? Ask that question of your heart; and then apply the answer to the case of the deaf. What ever your reasons may be, they are my reasons for not desiring it in the case of the deaf child.

I mean to assert, that not one of you who read this paper — if you could possibly avoid it — would want your own hearing child to use pantomime, as his ordinary and usual means of communication, in place of English, though all the world might be able to understand it. What then would be your attitude towards a language of pantomime that nobody could

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understand, save yourself and a few others? If, through ignorance of how to manage your boy, you had neglected to teach him English, so that he had been forced to invent a crude language of this sort, which nobody could understand, save yourself and the few people at home, would you want him to retain it? Certainly not. You would want him to get rid of it just as soon as you knew how, and substitute English. Now this now this is the actual condition of the deaf child when he first enters school, and the actual attitude of the parents towards the child. He is sent to us to learn English — not other signs.

And what is our attitude towards the home-signs he brings into school? We all agree that it is not desirable to retain 13 them. We get rid of them as soon as we possibly can, by substituting for them either English words, or De l'Epee Signs (according to the method we employ). But the De l'Epee Sign-language is a language of pantomime even less intelligible to ordinary people, than the home signs home sign languages of the pupils; for it is not understood by the people at home, with whom the children come into the most personal and intimate relations; and most of the reasons that lead us to discard home-signs, are equally applicable, I think, to the De l'Epee signs as well.

Some of the disadvantages that I believe to attach to the use of the De l'Epee Sign-language have been touched upon incidentally in my remarks concerning Mr. Jenkins' paper (published in the Educator for March April 1894 pp.) so that I need not enlarge upon them here.

The disadvantages are many and obvious, but the advantages are not so clear to my mind. I should be very glad if some of my good friends among the Sign-teachers would only point them out to your readers; for I am sure we are all open to conviction, and have the welfare and happiness of deaf children much more at heart than the way in which they are taught.

It has often been claimed that the use of the De l'Epee language stimulates the mind of the pupil and arouses his dormant faculties. I can readily see that this may be the case;

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but I do not see why this is not also true of any other language you choose to employ. The dwarfed mental condition of the uneducated deaf child is simply due to lack of suitable communication with other minds:— He needs a language of greater capacity to express ideas, than he possesses in his own home-signs. The De l'Epee language has greater capacity; but English has greater capacity still. I speak from personal knowledge here: For it must not be supposed that I am entirely ignorant of the De l'Epee language of signs, having studied it conscientiously for more than a year, under such able instructors as William Martin Chamberlain, Phlio Philo Packard, and others. I must confess that I do not see why we should use an inferior language, when we have English right at our hands — and must teach it to him anyway first or last. Why not teach it first as last?

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It has been claimed that the De l'Epee language is an easier language to learn than English. This may be so but is that a sufficient reason for its use? Italian is probably easier than English; but that is no reason why we should make Italian the vernacular of an American child. That is no reason why we should teach him English by means of Italian. The very ease with which the De l'Epee Sign-language is acquired affords an explanation of the curious fact that it often usurps the place of English, as the vernacular of the deaf child, in spite of exclusion from the school room, and against the wishes of the teachers.

The remedy however is in our own hands. The deaf child does not know the De l'Epee Sign-language when he enters school; he acquires it there. It is true that he already knows and uses a crude form of Sign-language invented by himself and his friends at home; so that in this way peculiar signs, of home manufacture, are introduced into every school. This is the reason why pupils, even in old oral schools, are sometimes found to be using signs of some sort among themselves on the play ground and elsewhere. We regret it, but we cannot help it, The for the children did not learn them from us. and We get rid of them just as soon as we can. The children and their friends invented such signs at home because their parents did not didn't know how to teach them English. Do not Don't let us use De l'Epee signs for a similar the same reason; — it is for it's our business to

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know how. We are not responsible for the home-signs that appear in our schools; but we are responsible for the De l'Epee signs that are acquired in their place. The blame, if blame there be, rests on our shoulders; and we cannot shuffle off the responsibility, on to the shoulders of Dame Nature, on the ground that we do not “teach” the De l'Epee signs in our schools, but that the children acquire them themselves — naturally — without special instruction from us. The fact remains, that the deaf child does not know them when he enters school, but acquires them there; and he would not acquire them if he did not see them used. The remedy then is in our own hands: Don't use them at all, use English instead. Give him pure English instead of signs. Teach English by usage, and drop the Sign-language from our schools.

I have no doubt that all things have a use; and there may even be a use for the De l'Epee language of signs; but I do not think it is to be found in the instruction of the young. If use it has at all, it lies, I think, in the possibility of employing it as a means of reaching and benefitting adults who are unable to communicate with the hearing world. But this field of usefulness lies beyond our province as instructors of the young. We deal with children alone. The adults referred to represent our failures. Let us have as few of them as we possibly can.

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CONCLUSION.

You have asked me for “an authoritative statement” of my views relating to signs and the questions involved. You wish me in fact to place myself “in a clear and unequivocal position” so that all may understand exactly where I stand. In conclusion then I may say: — I believe in the use of natural actions and natural gestures, as hearing people employ them, not in any other way. I believe it to be a mistake to employ gestures in place of words; and natural pantomime, or sign-language of any sort, should not, I think, be used as a means of communication. I do not object to manual alphabets of any kind in the early earlier stages of instruction.

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I prefer the pure oral method to any other; but I would rather have a deaf child taught through De l'Epee signs than not educated at all. I think there are two classes of deaf persons who should certainly be taught by oral methods, the semi-deaf, and the semi-mute; and I think that the semi-deaf should all receive the benefits of auricular instruction.

In regard to the others I believe there is room for honest differences of opinion. In their case I am not an advocate exclusively of the pure oral method alone, but look also with equal favor upon the manual-alphabet method as developed in the Rochester school. In fact I advocate pure English methods as opposed to sign s ; and do not think it matters very much whether you begin with written language and end with speech; or begin with speech and end with written language; the final resul t , I think, I will be substantially the same . in either case. Helen Keller is a case in point. I do not approve of continuing the manual alphabet method through out the whole school life of the pupil, but look upon it 17 only as a means to an end. The oral method should, I think, be used in the higher grades; and speech-reading be substituted for the manual alphabet after familiarity with the English language, and a good vocabulary, have been gained. In my preference oral methods come first; the manual alphabet method second; and the sign-language method last; but my heart is with teachers of the deaf whatever their method s may be.

17½ The great movement now going on in sign-schools towards the greater use of manually-spelled English, and the less use of signs, meets with my full sympathy and approval. Those schools that now limit the use of the sign-language to chapel exercises, and to communication in the play ground, have in my opinion, made a step in the right direction. My attitude towards them is Hamlet's attitude towards the players:— “Do not saw the air too much with your hand — thus ,. * * * * I pray you avoid it.” You remember what the first player said:— “I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us.” To which Hamlet replied “O reform it altogether”.

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In regard to the proper use of Action and Gesture I cannot do better than give you Hamlet's advice to the players — which is my advice to you all.

“Suit the action to the word, and the word to the action, with this special observance that you o'erdo not the modesty of Nature”. (Hamlet Act. Scene).

Alexander Graham Bell